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ABSTRACT

The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and its member institutions participated in the 2002 University Applicant Survey to gain a better understanding of prospective university students. The survey investigated various facets of the 2002 applicant pool, ranging from its demographic composition, academic achievements and educational intentions, to factors influencing university selection and recruitment communication and Internet use patterns. The survey involved 20,000 participants from the total population of approximately 100,000 applicants to Ontario universities for admission in 2002. For the first time in 2002, questions designed to address education equity were included. Almost 1% of 2002 respondents were Aboriginal (indigenous Canadians), 3% were disabled, and 33% were members of a visible minority group. These findings were similar to those of the preceding year. Applicants had decided at an average age of 13.5 years to attend university, and the highest proportion of respondents (26.4%) were from households with an annual income from \$50,000 Canadian to \$89,999. Overall, the top five factors influencing university selection were: (1) academic reputation; (2) safe environment; (3) graduates getting high quality jobs; (4) graduates getting into top professional and graduate schools; and (5) emphasis on teaching. The majority of applicants thought that the frequency of communication between the university and the applicant was about right. Findings also show that access to the Internet continued to increase for these applicants, with 95% now having access at home. (SLD)

2002 UNIVERSITY APPLICANT SURVEY

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COUNCIL OF
ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES

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2002 University Applicant Survey

The COU and its member institutions participated in the 2002 University Applicant Survey (UAS)¹ to better understand prospective university students. The survey investigated various facets of the 2002 applicant pool, ranging from its demographic composition, applicants' academic achievements and educational intentions, factors influencing their university selection as well as their concerns relating to attending university, and recruitment communication and internet usage patterns.

Background

The 2002 UAS involved 20,000 participants randomly selected from the total population of approximately 100,000 applicants applying (at the time of the survey) to Ontario universities for admission in 2002². The 2002 UAS also marked the first year that all provincially funded universities in the province participated.

A key point to note is that, while sound statistical principles were used in sample design and in analysis, the survey results should not be treated as "statistical" per se. Rather, the findings provide a general description of applicants to Ontario universities³. Acumen has strongly cautioned readers against drawing any statistical inferences from the results.

Findings with Respect to Equity Issues

Unique to the 2002 UAS was the inclusion of questions designed to address issues related to equity in education. This was done in response to a recommendation in the 2001 Equity Survey Report⁴ that equity-related questions should be included in the UAS since both doubling the sample size and measures to increase the response rate⁵ would provide a better reading of these issues⁶.

¹ Acumen Research Group Inc. conducted the 2002 UAS, developing the broad topics and the questionnaire in consultation with a COU Steering Committee of university representatives and three corporate clients.

² Of the 20,000 randomly selected applicants to Ontario universities, a total of 7,200 surveys were returned correctly completed, providing an overall response rate of 36.1%.

³ While many findings were broken down by various demographic groupings, it should be stressed that where sample sizes were small, for example less than 100, special note of the sample size has to be taken when reviewing findings for these groups. Nonetheless, even though sample sizes are small and results are likely to fluctuate from year to year, the findings provide important exploratory information and trends that can be revealing.

⁴ http://www.cou.on.ca/publications/briefs_reports/online_pubs/EquitySurvey2001.pdf

⁵ The UAS response rate was almost double that of the 18.4% response rate of the 2001 Equity Survey.

⁶ The COU Steering Committee devised three new questions addressing Aboriginal, disability and visible minority status consistent with those asked in the 2001 Equity Survey. The inclusion of the questions into the UAS provided several advantages: it was much more cost effective to send out a single survey, while still continuing to provide the needed longitudinal data; since the UAS is conducted in the spring, results would be available before students arrive on campus; the UAS is an extensive questionnaire, which would allow for greater cross-tabulations; a larger sample size (doubling from previous UAS efforts) and efforts to improve the UAS response rate would help paint a fuller picture, albeit involving a smaller number of potential respondents than in the Equity Survey.

The respondents were made up of approximately 61% women and 39% men; this distribution was consistent with both the 2001 Equity Survey (61% female and 39% male) and the 2001 UAS study (65% female and 35% male)⁷. Turning to the sample group, the representation of females in the 2002 UAS sample was only slightly higher than in the total applicant population, as per OUAC statistics: of all undergraduate applicants (as of July 2002), 54.6% were female and 45.4% male, compared to the proportions in the UAS sample drawn in March 2002 of 55.8% female and 44.2% male.

Almost one percent of 2002 UAS respondents were Aboriginal, three percent were disabled and thirty-three percent were members of a visible minority group. These results were very similar to those from the 2001 Equity Survey, in which the proportion of the three groups were two percent, five percent and thirty-four percent respectively⁸.

Higher proportions of Aboriginal respondents, compared to Non-Aboriginal respondents, were female, had grade averages between 70% and 79%, had household incomes below \$50,000 and intended to complete a Bachelor's degree. The results for part-time employment and grade averages above 90% were fairly consistent between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents.

Respondents with disabilities, in general, were more likely than respondents without disabilities to have grade averages below 70%; were much less likely to have household incomes below \$50,000; and were more likely to have intentions to pursue a Doctorate or Law degree. Respondents with disabilities, however, closely resembled respondents without disabilities with regards to gender, the remaining grade categories and patterns of part-time employment⁹.

Respondents belonging to a visible minority group, in general, were less likely than non-visible minority respondents to be female or to be employed part-time. Visible minority respondents were also more likely to have grade averages above 90%, to have household incomes below \$50,000 and to have intentions to pursue an MBA or Medical degree.

Findings with Respect to Other Issues

The average age at which applicants decided to enter university was 13.5 years. Female applicants, applicants with higher-grade averages and applicants from higher income households made their decision at a younger age. The proportion of applicants with grade averages above 90% continued to represent nearly one-fifth of the applicant pool. However, the gender-based difference within the 90% grade average group narrowed: in 2001, the proportion of applicants with averages above 90% was 4.8 percentage points higher for males than females while in 2002, the difference was 2.3 percentage points.

Applicants were asked about the highest degree they intended to complete. Interest in a Medicine degree and an MBA remained fairly consistent over the years, with around

⁷ There were a total of 170 French first language participants representing 2.4% of the total sample; the gender split among French respondents was also fairly consistent: 68% female and 32% male.

⁸ When comparing these specially designated groups to the overall applicant pool, many detailed findings did vary and sometimes substantially.

⁹ The distribution of results did vary between the five types of disability defined: learning, mobility, sensory, psychiatric and other types.

11% and 10% of applicants respectively expressing their desire for these areas. Interest in a Law degree increased from a low of 4.0% of applicants in 1999 to 6.3% in 2002. Applicants from the highest income households were more likely to be interested in Law, Medicine and MBA degrees. Interest in a Teaching degree decreased slightly, to 7.4% this year from a peak of 8.6% in 2000. Roughly 20% of applicants intended to complete a Bachelors degree, 18% a Masters degree and around 11% a Doctorate degree.

With respect to total household income per year, the highest proportion of respondents fell into the \$50,000-\$89,999 income range in 2002, which at 26.4% was an increase of slightly more than one percentage point from 2001. The proportion of respondents with incomes below \$20,000 stood at 8.3%, a substantial decline from the 16.0% registered in 2001, while the proportion of respondents with incomes in the \$20,000-\$49,999 range was 18.5%, a slight decline from 19.7% in 2001. The proportion in the above \$90,000 income group rose to 23.3% in 2002 from 18.5% the previous year, as did the proportion of respondents who did not know their household income, to 23.5% in 2002 from 20.6% in 2001. A more complete assessment of the underlying trend in the income distribution of applicants, however, requires monitoring over a longer timeframe¹⁰.

The findings also revealed that 4% of all applicants apply to U.S. schools, 15% to non-Ontario universities and 22% to Ontario colleges. Applications outside of Ontario correlate with grades; five percent of applicants with grade averages above 90% applied to U.S. schools and two percent to other international schools. Since 1999, applications to U.S. schools have increased slightly each year, while applications to non-Ontario universities have fluctuated from around 13.5% to 15%, and those to Ontario colleges from a low of 13% to a high of 23%. Overall, 12% of applicants had plans to attend college after completing university; however, the proportion of applicants who view college as a complement to university grew.

Overall, the top-five factors influencing university selection were: academic reputation, safe environment, graduates getting high quality jobs, graduates getting into top professional/grad schools and emphasis on teaching.

- Of the 6 different financial factors, the perception that graduates get high quality jobs continued to be the most influential, with tuition levels having only a moderate influence on university selection.
- Of the 16 university environment factors, academic reputation was the most influential, while a safe environment took over second place from graduates getting high quality jobs.
- A visit to campus continued to be the most influential information factor, followed by the INFO Guide and the university's websites.

When asked to rate the factors that make their first choice of university to attend better than their second or third choice, academic reputation received the highest mean score. It is interesting, however, that the second highest rated factor was "atmosphere" of the first choice university.

¹⁰ Caution is necessary as there was a noticeable increase in the proportion of those who did not know their household income in 2002 from the previous year. Moreover, both the survey's sample size and its response rate doubled in 2002 compared to 2001.

Applicants also rated their level of concern with general aspects of attending university as well as aspects related to the double cohort. Females and visible minority groups expressed higher levels of concern across the board. Finding employment following university, accessing professors and career development remained the top-three general concerns. Applicant concerns regarding the impact of the "double cohort" increased over the last year. The top-three "double cohort" related concerns were: difficulty getting into required classes, decreasing access to professors and decreasing access to academic counselling.

With respect to communication between applicants and universities, the majority of applicants (55%) felt the frequency of communication was about right. 40% of applicants received 1-2 communications, with the same proportion receiving 3-4 communications. The frequency of communication was positively correlated with grade point average. Brochure/print communication materials were still the most preferred modality for most types of information. While almost 20% of applicants were aware of *Choices* and *Schoolfinder* as a source of education related information, less than 15% of applicants actually used them (14% and 11% respectively).

Access to the Internet continued to increase, with 95% of applicants now having access at home. The majority of applicants with access at home (54%) had high-speed access. When it came to financial transactions, the vast majority of applicants still did not believe the Internet was safe/secure, although the proportion of applicants who view the Internet as safe rose from 29% in 2001 to 35.5% in 2002. Interest in taking online courses at university also rose steadily, with approximately 58% of applicants "somewhat" or "very much" interested in this option. Interest in the use of computers/internet in classes and course work continued to remain high, with over 60% "somewhat" or "very much" interested in this feature. A little over half (54%) of the applicants expressed "somewhat" to "very much" interest in mandatory laptop purchase/ lease programs. In terms of the usefulness of various forms of information on university websites, financially related items topped the list, while the largest increases in interest were for liaison visits to high schools in their area, usefulness of job search and placement services, and information on professors.